

Group says whales should be freed to go home

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A female orca leaps from the water while breaching in Puget Sound west of Seattle, Washington. Photo: AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

SEATTLE — Lolita the orca was taken from Puget Sound here in the Pacific Northwest many years ago. She has been kept at Miami's Seaquarium ever since.

On Wednesday, the government declared that Lolita is still a Puget Sound orca. The department of the government that made the announcement is called the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Orcas are also known as killer whales. They are part of the dolphin family and are very large. Males can grow as much as 30 feet long, and females as long as 26 feet.

There are now fewer than 80 wild orcas left in the Puget Sound near Washington state. Because there are so few, they are protected by the government.

Now that Lolita has been listed as a Puget Sound orca, she too will have special protection. She is covered by a law known as the Endangered Species Act.

"Lolita Is Healthy And Thriving"

People seeking Lolita's release welcomed the change. Some may try to force Seaquarium to free her, by arguing in court that it is now against the law to hold her.

Howard Garrett belongs to a group called the Orca Network. He hopes that Lolita will one day be moved to a small bay off of San Juan Island. There she could be prepared to re-enter the wild, he said.

However, Seaquarium says it has no plans to release Lolita.

"Lolita has been part of the Miami Seaquarium family for 44 years," said Andrew Hertz, who runs Seaquarium. "Lolita is healthy and thriving."

Hertz said Lolita has been in the aquarium so long she may no longer be able to live in the ocean on her own. "We are not willing to treat her life as an experiment," he said.

The Great Whale Roundup

Between 1965 and 1975, many Puget Sound orcas were captured by aquariums. Lolita was taken during that period.

It is now against the law to harm or mistreat a Puget Sound orca. However, NOAA said that keeping an orca in an aquarium is not necessarily mistreatment. It depends on how the orca is kept.

Orca activists say the fact that Lolita has so little space is a form of mistreatment. They also believe it is wrong to force her to perform in shows.

The public is increasingly turning against "the whole idea of performing orcas," Garrett said.

There Are Many Concerns

NOAA officials still have concerns about releasing captive whales, though. They worry about the spread of disease. They also question whether newly released orcas are able to find food on their own.

NOAA said other attempts to release captive orcas have been unsuccessful. Some freed orcas have died.

Garrett said if Lolita is freed, she would first be taken to a netted-off area of the bay. She would be accompanied by familiar trainers, who would help her "every bit of the way," he said. Only when she was completely ready would she be released into the open ocean.

Keiko's Struggles

Some who oppose a release point to the experience of an orca named Keiko. A captive orca, Keiko starred in the 1993 movie "Free Willy." The movie is about a boy fighting for the release of a whale.

Keiko was brought to Iceland to learn how to fish and meet other orcas. He was released into the wild in 2002 and died in 2003. Some feel he died because he did not know how to live on his own.

Garrett does not agree. He visited Keiko in Iceland in 1999. There was plenty of evidence that Keiko could catch fish on his own, he said. "He loved it."

Mark Simmons has a different view. He led a team of scientists that worked on Keiko's reintroduction into the wild. He said Keiko never was able to catch fish on his own, and kept on wanting to be around people.

Simmons wrote a book called "Killing Keiko." In it he says the orca suffered a long slow death. Keiko did not get enough to eat and finally died from an infection, he said.

Garrett said what matters is not "the fact that Keiko died, but how he died."